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National Conservation Buffer Initiative

Questions and Answers

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service



Question: What is the national conservation buffer initiative?

Answer: The initiative is an effort to use grasses and trees to protect and enhance all the resources on a farm. It's an attempt to help producers not only maintain their best land in crop production, but also to make good use of marginal land.

Conservation buffers can be a key to maintaining a healthy, productive farm. Healthy farms produce much more than crops and livestock, and using buffer strips is an excellent way to ensure good water, fish and wildlife habitat, better air quality and other environmental benefits.

Question: What are buffer strips?

Answer: A conservation buffer strip is an area or strip of land maintained in permanent vegetation to help control pollutants and manage other environmental problems. Examples of conservation practices that serve as buffers include filter strips, riparian (streamside) forest buffers, contour buffer strips, field borders, wind-breaks and shelterbelts, herbaceous wind barriers, cross wind trap strips, and alley cropping systems. Other practices considered as buffers or closely associated to them are hedgerow plantings, grassed waterways, and streambank protection measures.

Question: How do buffer strips help a landowner?

Answer: Many ways. They slow water runoff, trap sediment, and enhance infiltration in the buffer. Buffers also trap fertilizers, pesticides, bacterial and viral pathogens, and heavy metals. They can also help trap snow and cut down on blowing soil in areas with strong winds. They can protect livestock and wildlife from harsh weather and can protect buildings from wind damage.

Buffers can reduce noise and odor. They may be the primary source of food, nesting cover, and shelter for many wildlife species. Or, they may be the connecting corridor for wildlife to move safely from one habitat area to another.

Buffers can help stabilize a stream and reduce its water temperature. They can serve as a turn row. The vegetation, whether it's forage or trees, can be planned for harvest. Buffers offer a setback distance of ag chemical use from water sources.

Like the trim on a house makes the house look better, well-planned buffers improve the appearance of a farm or ranch. A system of buffers gives some diversity to the landscape. If they are used as part of a conservation system on a farm or ranch, they will make good use of areas that shouldn't be cropped.

Conservation buffers are a visual showcase of the conservation ethics of a farmer or rancher, a sign of a good neighbor.

Question: Why is this initiative being started now?

Answer: Conservation buffers have been around for some time. It is the conservation programs in the 1996 Farm Bill that make them particularly timely now. For instance, the continuous signup for Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is an opportunity to use buffers to protect the most fragile areas of a farm.

Producers don't have to make an all-or-nothing choice on bringing land out of CRP—they can crop the best and make buffer strips of the rest. If the whole field is not accepted by USDA for CRP, they may consider establishing buffers and entering them into the CRP through the continuous signup program. The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and state and local programs offer both technical and financial help in establishing buffers.

Question: Who is promoting conservation buffers?

Answer: The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) started the buffer initiative. NRCS conservationists are working with other federal agencies in USDA, including the Farm Service Agency, Cooperative Extension Service, and the Forest Service. Farm and conservation organizations involved include the National Corn Growers Association, the

National Association of Conservation Districts, and state conservation agencies. Private industry is also involved. Initiative leaders want to involve all groups who can help, including wildlife organizations, water quality agencies, and others.

Question: Where can buffer strips be used?

Answer: Buffer strips can be used along streams, on field edges, or within the field. Buffers are most effective if they are planned as part of a comprehensive conservation system. For instance, if contour buffers and grassed waterways are used on land that does not have adequate erosion protection, they will fill with sediment much more quickly. Or, a filter strip or forested riparian buffer along a stream will eventually cease to be effective if the streambank is actively eroding. An important consideration in planning buffers as part of the conservation system is their ability to be adjusted to improve or meet specific wildlife habitat needs.

Question: What kind of help is available?

Answer: Your local USDA Service Center is the place to start. The staff will know what technical and financial help is available, including the USDA programs listed above and any state or local programs offered through local conservation districts. NRCS and Farm Service Agency employees can also point to successful local examples of buffers. NRCS conservationists can help producers plan effective buffer strips as part of a comprehensive conservation system.



Contour buffer strips, field borders, grassed waterways, filter strips and riparian forest buffers are all part of the buffer initiative.

Conservationists urge their use as part of a complete conservation system.



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